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INFO RUCNOSC/OSCE POST COLLECTIVE
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000046

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY); INL (BUHLER); EUR/ACE (MCKANE)

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Turkmenistan Customs Seeks Increased Cooperation

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Deputy Chief of Customs Amanmamet Muhammetgulyev told SCA Deputy Assistant Secretary Evan Feigenbaum during an unexpected sit-down meeting at the Altyn Asyr Customs Training Center on January 10 that Customs has benefited from USG cooperation and looked forward to enhancing this relationship in the future. Muhammetgulyev cited both the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) English language training project and the two border crossing checkpoint construction projects, one on the border with Iran and one on the border with Afghanistan, as positive areas of engagement and noted the continuing need for training assistance. End Summary.

A Conversation with Law Enforcement

¶2. (SBU) Although the Government of Turkmenistan agreed to host just one official meeting during DAS Feigenbaum's January 10-15 introductory visit to Turkmenistan-- a meeting with Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov that ran to three and a half hours -- DAS Feigenbaum created an opportunity to discuss USG law enforcement assistance cooperation and areas for further engagement during an INL project site visit. Deputy Chief of Customs Muhammetgulyev, a familiar face to Embassy officers working with the customs service, hosted the DAS and Charge at the Altyn Asyr State Customs Service training center in Ashgabat. Muhammetgulyev was prepared to make a statement of gratitude and guide the visitors through a routine tour of the semi-renovated building, but during the initial meet and greet, DAS Feigenbaum ignited a discussion after acknowledging that law enforcement, particularly counternarcotics and border security efforts, was one of the more positive and productive areas of cooperation the USG enjoyed with the host government.

¶3. (SBU) DAS Feigenbaum solicited areas of Turkmen interest for expansion, but Muhammetgulyev was indirect in answering the query. After thanking DAS Feigenbaum for USG support for the customs service in general, Muhammetgulyev said that over 100 students had already benefited from the U.K. English language program that is now a joint U.K./U.S project. Muhammetgulyev was responsive, though vague, in answering questions about specific shortcomings or needs within the customs service, but was comfortable and verbose in describing customs' work in the border areas, including an admission

that border checkpoints communicate only monthly with their cross-border counterparts in Kazakhstan by raising a flag to signal a meeting time; there are no direct lines of communication across the borders. Avoiding any specific requests, Muhammetgulyev indirectly noted the need for continued training and appropriate equipment.

Customs Training Center

¶4. (SBU) The Altyn Asyr center was, until 2002, an operational customs building. During the past few years, the building has been renovated, room by room, by a variety of international and diplomatic missions, both addressing the needs of developing a professional customs service and making their best attempts to get a foot in the door with law enforcement agencies. The building houses classrooms laden with computers and instructional materials supplied by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), OSCE, the European Union and, most recently, the European Customs service. Notably a latecomer in providing assistance to the training center, the USG is providing only language learning support to the participating law enforcement agencies: Customs, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of National Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the State Border Service. In response to Feigenbaum's questions about the integration of the language learners in the work force, Muhammetgulyev said that customs officials are routinely rotated throughout the border stations and national points of entry, and that the student population crosscuts the agency. Muhammetgulyev said he was also a student in the program.

Comment

ASHGABAT 00000046 002 OF 002

¶5. (SBU) Muhammetgulyev did not waver in discussing the need for continued assistance, particularly in regard to cross-border issues and training. Muhammetgulyev is not the Customs Service point of contact for the border crossing checkpoint stations, but he was keen to note the benefits of the modern and fully-equipped buildings on two significant borders and identified the need for integrated training at these sites. End Comment.

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